
Chapter 4

How Do People Respond to COVID-19? A Set of Reflections

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to provide an understanding of the daily micro-interactions that people have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing upon real-life stories and reflections collected from 24 people in Hong Kong during the early stages of the pandemic, the author explored people’s daily interpersonal interactions, how they experienced COVID-19, and how they acted morally in the interest of the public good. She also explored daily experiences and reflections in response to the pandemic and the positive beliefs and values people expressed while fighting the crisis. She found that “face masks,” “keeping social distance,” “caring for people in need,” and “worry, anxiety, and stress” were the four most common themes written about. Most entries expressed positive values such as caring, empathy, and responsibility. Despite the negative emotions and stress resulting from the pandemic, people still encouraged themselves to stay positive and act in the interest of people in need and other marginalized groups.

KEYWORDS: micro-interaction, real-life stories, dilemma, reflections

BACKGROUND

The preliminary idea for this chapter came about in the early weeks of the outbreak of coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) disease in February 2020 and was followed by my unpublished social media post entitled *Sunshine in the Dark: Touching Moments During the COVID-19 Period* (Wong, 2020). In this short piece, accounts of moral behavior observed in daily life and seen on social media are shared with the readers to demonstrate positive human interactions in the community. This positive behavior was like sunshine illuminating the dark spaces of people's life, releasing them from their worries and relieving their stress at times when little was known about COVID-19. In these early stages of the pandemic, the COVID-19 vaccine had not yet been developed; wearing surgical masks, practicing good hygiene, and maintaining social distance were the only things people could do and knew to do in daily life. Below is the original piece of writing:

2019 ended with the start of COVID-19. The first diagnosed case in Hong Kong was found at the end of January 2020, and the virus really started spreading during the Lunar New Year celebrations. In such a tough moment, some people did not forget the needs of others.

We could see *care*, when a girl helped her younger sister wear her mask and wash her hands correctly.

We could see *love*, when a husband sent a few boxes of masks to his wife and son from overseas.

We could see *responsibility*, when a boss provided enough masks and supplements for his staff who regularly performed cleaning duties.

We could see *generosity*, when a passenger gave a mask to another passenger who did not have a mask to wear on the bus as all other people did.

We could see *integrity*, when a shop owner sold quality disinfection supplements at a reasonable price to elderly people.

We could see *kindness*, when a woman visited her neighbor who lived alone and sent greetings and essential hygiene products to him.

We could see *collaboration*, when a group of residents worked together with the staff to clean the corridors of their building.

We could see *compassion*, when a doctor nominated himself to join the front line and take care of infected patients.

We are proud of these caregivers who provide for people in need in these dark moments. I hope a new day will dawn soon and that the epidemic will be over. A sincere blessing to all. (Wong, 2020)

FACING THE GLOBAL COVID-19 CRISIS AND THE NEW NORMAL

A year has passed; it is February 2021. COVID-19 vaccines have been produced and people are being vaccinated. However, the pandemic is still not completely under control. According to the World Health Organization, as of February 9, 2021 the numbers of confirmed cases and deaths worldwide were 105.4 million and 2.3 million, respectively. At that time, the United States (871,365 cases), Brazil (328,652 cases), France (136,154 cases), the United Kingdom (133,747 cases), and Russia (116,842 cases) had the highest numbers of new cases (World Health Organization, 2021).

Confronted with this global crisis, people have employed various methods to simultaneously face the ensuing challenges and learn to live a new normal life. Confirmed cases of people who are currently infected or under examination require assistance from medical staff in order to receive the appropriate treatment. Everyone needs support to face the problems of daily living. For example, regarding public health everyone is very concerned about the latest details about the pandemic; they constantly take note of updates on health tips and guidance, the number of confirmed cases, and affected living areas and buildings. All relevant pandemic information can be obtained from the government website of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region,¹ as well as its daily press releases and live broadcasts. For information on the global situation, international organizations such as the World Health Organization² can provide detailed information. Medical experts and healthcare providers routinely release research findings and practical tips through the media. All these professionals help to protect everyone and prevent

¹ See <https://www.chp.gov.hk/en/>

² See <https://www.who.int/>

the virus from spreading. Notably, as the pandemic has already lasted for a year, anxiety, worry, and stress seem to be unavoidable. Concerns about the negative effects of COVID-19 on mental and physical health are continually increasing (Lopes & Jaspal, 2020; Osofsky et al., 2020; Panchal et al., 2020). Psychologists, counsellors, and other professionals provide necessary services for people in need. Various governments worldwide have provided financial support to unemployed people, employees in affected businesses, and other disadvantaged groups. Online teaching and learning platforms have become the new normal at schools and universities (Amrane-Cooper, 2020; Chan, 2020; Cuevas, 2020; Xiong et al., 2020). In short, people have been learning to survive and manage their problems in every possible way during COVID-19.

THE UNKNOWN: DAILY EXPERIENCES AND MICRO-INTERACTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF MORAL BEHAVIOR

The aforementioned references demonstrate some general observations across three domains. First, the COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis. It brings to light not only health issues but also issues related to economics, social welfare, and education, and numerous others. Second, during the pandemic people have learned how to engage in a new type of normal life while facing daily problems as they wait for the pandemic to end. Third, experts and professionals in fields such as medicine, public health, economics, psychology, technology, and education have provided support and advice to help people solve or at least ease their problems.

From the macro perspective, all the latest news, reports, statistics, announcements, research, guidelines, and funding programs by governments, international organizations, and experts are undeniably helpful. These sources have provided the public with necessary information about the ongoing pandemic and the corresponding initiatives, which help them acquire the knowledge and skills required to survive during times of crisis. All such actions reflect the importance of professionals in the modern world; experts act in the interest of the public good by applying their knowledge, capabilities, and skills. Despite this, the micro-interactions that have occurred in communities during COVID-19 and their effects on people's daily life remain unknown. How do regular, everyday citizens feel, think, and react during the pandemic? How do regular people support others and act

together with them in the interest of the collective good? Accordingly, in the small-scale project described below I explored from the micro perspective what individuals experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they coped with it by analyzing their real-life stories.

TWENTY-FOUR REAL-LIFE STORIES, DILEMMAS, AND REFLECTIONS

This project was not conducted exclusively for academic discussion purposes; instead, it was intended to shed light on the current social world through chronicling the micro-interactions of regular, everyday people. To initiate this project, invitations to participate were sent to members of the author's personal network in July 2020 after consideration of time and resource limitations. The invitations were intended to obtain the participants' consent and to obtain their help in extending the invitation to members of their own networks, creating a snowball effect. This snowball method is intended to help expand the network and recruit participants from different age demographics and varied backgrounds in the shortest possible time (Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Finkel & Sang, 2016).

Ultimately, 24 short written entries were collected from 13 female and 11 male participants. Seventeen participants were employed in various sectors such as education, travel, business, and nongovernmental organizations. Four participants were students enrolled in secondary (2) and tertiary education (2). The remaining three participants consisted of two homemakers and one unemployed person.

The 24 entries encompassing real-life stories, dilemmas, and reflections on COVID-19 were the primary data and were analyzed using NVivo 12 software for qualitative analysis and identification of common themes. In total, the entries were comprised of 7,614 words, including seven entries in Chinese totaling 2,873 words and 17 entries in English totaling 4,741 words. The length of the entries ranged from 44 to 648 words.

Sixteen of the 24 entries (67%) involved personal reflections on life during COVID-19 and 10 (42%) involved real-life dilemmas. In addition, six (25%) provided general observations about daily life during COVID-19, whereas five (21%) described specific incidents, including details of the experience and the corresponding reflections.

The entries cover topics in the individual, family, school, workplace, and community domains. Community (12 entries, 50%) and individual (11 entries, 46%) were the two primary domains; only the two secondary school students wrote about their real-life study experiences (two entries, 8%). Five entries (21%) were about the family and six (25%) were about the workplace. Table 1 presents excerpts from selected entries in each domain.³

Table 1

Domains and Sample Quotes from the 24 Written Entries

Domains (Number of entries)	Sample quotes
Individual (11)	“During COVID-19, I have learned a lot and valued my life more than ever before.” (Participant 8)
Family (5)	“Becoming a role model and teaching children how to face future challenges is the responsibility of parents.” (Participant 21; written in Chinese and translated into English)
School (2)	“Apart from learning, I watch YouTube videos about the universe, read books, and spend time running and weightlifting.” (Participant 4)
Workplace (6)	“As a new teacher, I found myself in a dilemma over how to deal with school suspensions due to the coronavirus.” (Participant 23)
Community (12)	“Quarantine, work from home, class suspensions... all methods of social distancing to avoid large crowds and gatherings are agreed on by all health experts and may help limit the spread of the novel coronavirus infection.” (Participant 15)

Selection of specific themes for analysis was based on the results of applying keyword searches to the entries. Four themes were identified as the most prevalent: “face masks” (21 entries), “keeping social distance” (18 entries), “caring for people in need” (14 entries), and “worry, anxiety, and stress” (13 entries). The six less common themes were “personal and social good” (nine entries), “cheering up” (seven entries), “flexibility and change” (six entries), “life and economic value” (six entries), “new things and habits” (five entries), and “valuing and treasuring” (five entries). Table 2 presents all 10 themes with excerpts of relevant entries for each.

³ All participant quotes were originally in English unless indicated otherwise.

Table 2

Themes and Sample Quotes from the 24 Written Entries

Themes (Number of entries)	Sample quotes
Face masks (21)	“Some people were willing to give their masks to less fortunate citizens, particularly working-class families. Buying masks is burdensome for such families because masks can be very expensive. We feel that these people are kind and care not only about the health of citizens but also about the health of society.” (Participant 10)
Keeping social distance (18)	“A real-life story in the COVID-19 period: I became a mushroom [grew without sunlight] because of the ‘Stay Home Stay Safe’ guidelines.” (Participant 1)
Caring for people in need (14)	“I found that some enthusiastic people and organizations provided timely support during the pandemic to people in need, for example, underprivileged groups, by donating prevention supplies and helping many working-class families with urgent needs.” (Participant 7)
Worry, anxiety, and stress (13)	“When Hong Kong students were dismissed from school, and workers in Australia were recommended to work from home, my girl still needed to study face-to-face without a mask. I became anxious.” (Participant 17)
Personal and social good (9)	“Being considerate to people in the community may not bring immediate betterment to ourselves, but contribution to the collective good by everyone in community is the only way to beat the pandemic and improve society.” (Participant 24)
Cheering up (7)	“I believe that as long as we help each other, care more about people in need, and work together to fight the epidemic, the epidemic will soon be controlled.” (Participant 7)
Flexibility and change (6)	“During times of crisis, we can do more than we think, particularly by caring more and acting quickly [flexibly]. Rules would have to be written in black and white to provide an appropriate response; however, in extraordinary times, understanding and flexibility is the most correct rule.” (Participant 2)
Life and economic value (6)	“I am concerned about the health of my family and colleagues, but my company is only concerned with costs and job efficiency.” (Participant 6; written in Chinese and translated into English)
New things and habits (5)	“I started sleeping and waking up early. I feel that my muscles are stronger. My cooking skills have improved. I can eat healthy, and my ability to think flexibly has been enhanced.

Unexpectedly, in facing a worsening situation, I came to see a new side of myself.” (Participant 16; written in Chinese and translated into English)

Valuing and
treasuring (5)

“This is a time for us to value our family and the people around us; we should be content with the moments we have, whether we are together or alone.” (Participant 8)

POSITIVE VALUES AND ACTIONS DURING COVID-19

Although people have felt stressed and worried during the pandemic, they have done good things for the people in their communities. To determine how people have done these good things, the expressions of positive values and caring actions identified in the entries were evaluated. In total, 19 of the 24 entries contained expressions of positive values (e.g., care, empathy, responsibility). More than half of the 24 (13 entries, 54%) described real-life experiences involving relationships between care givers and receivers (e.g., employers and employees, customers and me, citizens and me, and passengers and me).

The following examples illustrate micro-interactions reflecting the four most common themes (face masks; keeping social distance; caring for people in need; worry, anxiety, and stress) and the corresponding positive actions performed for both the individual and the public good by people fighting COVID-19.

Sharing Face Masks with People in Need

I had an interesting experience during the COVID-19 period. When everybody was searching for face masks and hand sanitizer, most people only considered whether they had enough masks. However, many organizations and volunteer groups started collecting face masks for distribution to marginalized communities such as struggling families, elderly people, low-income workers, and healthcare workers. The message of sharing with others was actively being promoted in society. I read lots of news about people who were willing to share virus prevention materials even if they didn't have enough for themselves. For me, I donated money to purchase virus prevention materials for people in need. Even now, I still keep some extra face masks in my bag if I need to share one with someone who

needs one. Sharing is vital in human life, and encouraging sharing in everyday life is essential. By sharing, we are sending a message that could completely change the way someone sees things, especially during something like COVID-19. All of us have the power to help people better their lives and understand the issues that we face in our overly complicated world today. (Participant 18, a female teacher)

Similar stories about sharing masks were related in other entries. For example, a young girl (Participant 13) gave her classmate a new mask when the classmate dropped hers on the floor. A homemaker (Participant 20) shared masks with people in high-risk situations, including a health care worker and a firefighter with a family. COVID-19 is a health and hygiene issue.

The sharing or donation of masks reflects a caring attitude towards others and generosity toward people in need. In particular, in the early stages of COVID-19, people did not fully grasp what was happening; they eventually learned that wearing face masks was the most effective method for protecting themselves and others. At that time, masks became as essential as property.

However, purchasing masks was not easy because of insufficient supplies and total buyouts. Thus, sharing masks with others in a time of crisis was highly appreciated and demonstrates what people did for people in need and those in their communities.

A Dilemma: Social Distancing or Personal Freedom?

As a committee member of a local community association, I was invited to participate in a meaningful activity in June [2020]. The activity aimed to recognize those in the general public who contributed to the community during COVID-19. More than 100 people from various sectors were invited. I was glad to attend the activity because it was a good opportunity to recognize members of the public who were fighting the coronavirus. Positive messages and values such as commitment, empathy, and courage were promoted during the ceremony. However, I wanted to act in consideration of those around me by reducing social contact to control the spread of

the virus. After consideration, I eventually rejected the invitation. From my perspective, the public health and safety are more important than individual freedom because a severe outbreak would seriously damage the society and the economy. Sacrificing our individual rights in this period is unavoidable because we have to learn how to protect and treasure our lives. We should avoid unnecessary high-risk events in this crucial period. (Participant 12, a male volunteer working for a nongovernmental organization)

In addition to wearing face masks, keeping social distance is another primary method for reducing the risk of infection. Keeping social distance to prevent the spread of the virus is the responsibility of each individual fighting COVID-19. During this period, people must be thoughtful and aware of other people whenever they plan to go outside. To protect others, the participants in this study gave up their personal desires and avoided unnecessary social events, such as joining a ceremony (Participant 12), going on a morning run (Participant 21), taking a pleasure trip (Participant 14), and joining a family reunion (Participants 9 and 17). These people sacrificed their personal interests in the interest of the collective good. The decisions of these people to reschedule, replan, and stay home demonstrate their wisdom, generosity, responsibility, and morality in the interest of protecting others and fighting the global COVID-19 crisis.

Caring Actions While Fighting COVID-19

COVID-19 has made a significant and negative impact on the travel and tourism industry. After first-round negotiations, the travel agency I work for allowed staff to choose whether they wanted to leave temporarily and look for other short-term jobs or stay in their current position but with a reduced salary. We knew that the company had started using their savings to maintain regular operations, and we knew our boss could have closed the company immediately to save money. However, our boss did not do so. We appreciated that we had a kind boss who was willing to face the challenge together with the staff. I also felt grateful to my customers; they also cared about our

situation. This is a society full of human interaction. We take care of people in need, and we support each other. (Participant 3, a man working for a travel agency; written in Chinese and translated into English)

COVID-19 not only puts people at risk of infection but also has compromised numerous industries, resulting in a severe economic recession. Thus, many people have been faced with the risk of losing their job and income. For example, Participant 9 worked for an international company; his company was restructured, and only the most valuable staff could remain. Although the government has special programs to support people who have experienced financial hardship during the pandemic, the collective support of individuals from the community is still required and should be continually encouraged. In Participant 3's entry above, the boss was kind; the story was quite encouraging. For employers, taking all risk and sustaining considerable monthly losses without terminating staff is not easy. The travel and tourism industry has been one of the most affected during this pandemic. The loss of a company is not insignificant. Despite this, the boss in the story decided to continue running the business and was willing to support the staff and fight the crisis together with them. This action demonstrates at the micro level how people help others during times of economic crisis, and at the macro level how the government and private organizations provide support.

Learning to Manage Stress

2020 is [a] really challenging year for me. During the pandemic, my plans have been disrupted, and I've been under a lot of pressure because of several issues. I think the biggest challenge is managing stress. [In] these six months I had to stay in Hong Kong, but because of the pandemic, I was afraid to go anywhere, so I stayed at home most of the time. The biggest pressure I faced in 2020 [was] to get a job after graduation, but many companies are cutting the budget. I have no intern[ship] experience, so I am less competitive with other graduates; this frustrates me because I don't want to be "NEET" [not in education, employment, or training]. [Luckily], I have friends who

are facing similar problems, so we [can commiserate]. I am so happy to have friends who are also “NEET”. I then met some friends who I hadn’t seen for a year, and I felt comfortable with them. When the pandemic is over, ask your friends to hang out. Another thing I learned during COVID-19 was a new skill. I spend too much time at home, so I tried to learn some new skills to increase my marketability. (Participant 14, a man who had recently graduated from university)

After a year of living during COVID-19, every participant experienced some type of worry or stress. Common sources of stress included risk of infection, job loss, salary cut, schedule delay, family reunion, work performance, study, and career planning (Participants 1, 3–6, 8–9, 12, 14–17, 19, 21, and 23, respectively). These people were simultaneously facing the crisis, solving various problems, and trying to live a normal life. In particular, Participant 14, a recent graduate student, had been trying to find a way to relieve stress and solve problems in his daily life. His solution was to commiserate with his friends who had similar problems and to learn new skills to increase his market value. Other concrete methods for releasing stress, reported by other participants, included exercising, helping other people, spending more time with family, cooking, and learning how to use new technologies. These activities helped people shift their focus to new experiences and adapt to the new normal during COVID-19.

Positive Thinking for Encouragement and Cheering Up

During COVID-19, I had a very bad experience with an unexpected result. I cannot stay with my family and face the virus with them. I feel bad about this, and nothing can replace the time spent with my beloved family. I’ve stayed overseas for half a year already because there are no flights back to Hong Kong. Business has been extremely poor, and most of the orders were cancelled, so my colleagues and I needed to take a month off with no pay. However, I started getting into cooking during my leisure time, which has made my life a bit more fun. My company was restructured, and only the most valuable staff were retained. Fortunately, I am among those who were able to

keep working. The virus has demonstrated my value. I believe that there are always chances in life; it all depends on how you act. Be well prepared, and good things will happen to you. (Participant 9, a male manager working overseas)

The pandemic is not a new experience for people. In 2003, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic lasted 4 months in Hong Kong. Of the 1,755 cases in Hong Kong, 299 died (World Health Organization, 2020). Unfortunately, people have experienced a much longer and more serious global crisis—COVID-19. No one knows when the pandemic will be completely controlled, but life goes on. Thinking positively and reflecting on life is the ideal for everyone who must observe, feel, and sense every detail of the daily micro-interactions they experience during the pandemic. For example, Participant 9 retained his job after his company restructured; he felt valued and treasured, and he promised to continue working hard and look towards the future. Participant 8 learned a lot and valued her life more than ever before; she encouraged everyone to connect and value the people around them. Participant 16 reflected on life, hoping that people could fight COVID-19 and have an opportunity to see a new side of themselves. Learning to face challenges, think positively, reflect on life, and plan for the future would be very beneficial for everyone during this unexpected global pandemic.

CONCLUSION

This short chapter presents several general observations from the public as well as descriptions of specific interactions among individuals during the early stages of COVID-19 in Hong Kong. Drawing upon real-life stories written by 24 participants and macro-statistical data retrieved from public sources, this study explored life during COVID-19 through the macro and micro perspectives of these participants, particularly with respect to morality. First, the written entries of the participants helped elucidate their daily lives and provided authentic accounts of their experiences, as well as their feelings, reflections, and the lessons they learned during COVID-19. Their interactions with people in the community, and the interactions of these people with one another, were documented and explored. These analyzes of people's daily experiences reveal that people experienced negative emotions, felt

stressed, and encountered dilemmas. In addition, they encouraged themselves to cheer up, and they did not forget their families, people in need, and marginalized groups. Second, the study provides authentic accounts from participants that support the understanding of morality as a collective response to macro-social interactions. People in Hong Kong fought COVID-19, managed health and economic problems, and did good things for other people, demonstrating their caring attitudes, responsibility, patience, and generosity. In difficult moments, their moral actions helped encourage everyone else and gave them the power, energy, and spirit to go on fighting. Thus, the study teaches us that COVID-19 is a life lesson and an opportunity to wake up and taste the real world in which we are living. Facing an ever-changing world, learning to prepare for the worst, thinking positively, and being reflective can help everyone face COVID-19 as well as other unexpected problems in life. Still, nobody knows when the pandemic will be controlled. Hopefully, everyone can go on helping one another and face this global challenge together.

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